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Contextual factors affecting inclusion during children's transitions from preschool to school

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The transition from preschool to school is an opportune time to investigate the process of inclusion as this marks entry into the formal education system. Few empirical studies have focused on how children with impairments experience the transition to school. Those available indicate that the stresses surrounding transitions for typically developing children (Peters, 1997; Renwick, 1984) tend to be compounded for children with impairments, their families and possibly schools (Bentley-Williams & Butterfield, 1996; Wartmann, 1997). Reasons suggested for this increased stress include concerns schools and communities have evolved with particular understandings, assumptions and values concerning disability, that undermine or oppose educational inclusion. (Ballard, 1991; Kliewer, 1998).

Historically, the focus has been on biological limitations that were assumed to be static and all-encompassing characteristics, as opposed to one of many dynamic attributes that shift depending upon the context. The deficit view of disability located the issue within the individual (Oliver, 1996), thereby ignoring the role of social or external factors. In line with this view, the individual was considered to be a burden to families (Farber, 1960) regular educational settings (Clarke & Clarke, 1974) and the community (Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives of New Zealand, 1956) and the response involved segregation for care and protection and 'treatment' for their deficiencies (Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives of New Zealand, 1956; Hunt, 2000). A prevalent discourse reflecting such deficit thinking is the personal tragedy or charity view of disability, (Oliver, 1996) which views people with impairments as "dependent, childlike, helpless, passive, needy and requiring compensation" (Neilson, 2000, p. 21). In educational settings, this can result in educators and peers responding to children with

impairments in compensatory rather than educational ways, thus limiting their opportunities for learning (Philips, 1997; Rietveld, 2002; 2005).

More recently, the historical deficit view of disability has been challenged as disability theorists and activists, and parents claim that it is not individual characteristics that disable, but contexts that fail to cater adequately for people with impairments (Clough & Barton, 1995; Oliver, 1986, 1996). This external location of disability is specified in the New Zealand Disability Strategy, “Disability is the process which happens when one group of people create barriers by designing a world only for their way of living, taking no account of the impairments other people have” (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001, p. 3). While not ignoring the existence of impairments and/or the usefulness of medical and therapeutic treatments (Barnes, 2003), the social model of disability acknowledges that how impairments are classified, treated and interpreted is socially constructed. The focus then shifts from the (deficit) individual to how mainstream contexts such as early childhood centres and schools respond to diversity.

Brofenbrenner’s ecological model (1979) and Vygotsky’s theory of learning (1978) share elements in common with the social model of disability. A common feature is their focus on the child’s functioning within her/his immediate contexts and their consideration of the broader social, political and structural factors impacting on that functioning. These models are therefore helpful in understanding whether the processes occurring during inclusion and transition are facilitative and supportive of development. A successful transition involves being treated as an equal, valued and contributing member of the centre, class and school and participation in the full range of culturally-valued roles of that setting (MacArthur, Purdue & Ballard, 2003; Rietveld, 2002). This enables culturally valued learnings necessary for living in an inclusive society take place (Vygotsky, 1978). When learning is conceptualised as a function of the quality of interactions with more skilled learners, it becomes evident that i) the quality of the child’s interactions and relationships with more expert learners is essential for optimal learning outcomes and ii), classmates need to be included in processes to establish an inclusive learning community. In such a community, members can value diversity and learn how to respond to classmates with impairments with dignity and respect. Children cannot learn to include others by

avoiding contact or by relating to children with impairments in stereotypical ways when the wider context fails to provide the necessary support for the development of more mutually-enhancing interactions (Biklen, 1985). The transition to school provides the context for children to engage in interactions that lead to culturally appropriate and valued outcomes. For such educational outcomes to accrue in the child's microsystem, they need to be accompanied by similar congruent processes involving trust and goal-consensus throughout the infrastructure of other systems affecting, but not containing the child.

Few, if any studies of children with impairments have investigated whether the outcomes following their transitions to school have been successful for the children, their families, schools and communities in terms of the quality of the children's experiences (their inclusion into enabling processes and outcomes). Some studies have investigated isolated aspects of the transition process, such as the parents' (usually mothers') perspectives (Bentley-Williams & Butterfield, 1996), recommended practices (e.g. the importance of shared processes, adequate funding) without identifying the goal of those processes which is presumably facilitative inclusion (Wartmann; 1997), global measures of success, such as a child not having to repeat a grade (Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen & Holburn, 1990) or a schools and parents' commitment to the process (Ward & Center, 1988). Since such studies provide no or minimal data on whether the children's experiences were facilitative of development, it is unknown whether they were enabling and reflective of the philosophy underlying inclusion as specified in the New Zealand Disability Strategy (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001).

None of these studies explored the importance of context on transitions, particularly at the level of the child's microsystem. This study focuses on this aspect. As part of a larger study investigating the transitions to school for children with and without DS (Rietveld, 2002), case studies are explored to highlight the varying influences of contexts on transitions for both children with and without DS.

METHOD

The report of the larger study provides detailed information regarding the rigour of ethical considerations and the rationale of the methodology.

Participants and Settings: Two boys with DS (Ian and Jonathan) and two typically developing boys (Jacob and Neil), their parents, teachers and other key people involved with their transition to school participated in this study. All the children were 4 years 11 months at the beginning of the study. Ian and Jacob attended the same local early childhood centre and school, while Jonathan and Neil attended a different local early childhood settings but the same school. The schools were in middle-high socio-economic suburbs of a large city. All boys came from supportive 2-parent families.

Data Sources and Analysis

- Running record observations were undertaken during their final week of preschool (8 hours), during the first 6 weeks of school (37-39 hours) and 3-4 months after school entry (5-6 hours)
- Interviews with parents and educators were undertaken throughout
- Other: field notes, permanent products, meeting observations

Data gathering was influenced by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological model based on the premise that the child is at the centre of and is affected by and affects several environmental systems, ranging from immediate settings such as the family, preschool or classroom to more remote contexts such as the quality of home-school relations, level of professional and practical support which are also influenced by broader cultural values and policies.

The data were analysed inductively for themes and patterns, describing the kinds of inclusion/exclusion and underlying processes taking place. Comparisons were made between children with and without DS and among the different institutions. In the next section, themes are described followed by participant experiences as case studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After reviewing the data for all the children with and without DS in both preschool and school settings, the full range of peer interactions reflected these categories:

General Themes

1. Exclusion (3 types)

- a) Active exclusion, b) Passive exclusion, c) Teasing

Since the purpose of this study is to explore inclusion, details of these exclusionary experiences will not be elaborated on.

2. Ineffective or Illusory inclusion

- a) Assigning child inferior roles, such as baby, pet, subordinate or object, oddity
- b) Including child to take risks for own purposes (e.g. to steal)
- c) (Level 1 inclusion) Participation in equal status interactions, but only in a narrow range of roles where connections between participants is superficial (e.g. politeness, occasional playmate). Might include lengthy episodes of interactive play but the participants do not seek one another out again.

3. Facilitative Inclusion (Level 2 inclusion)

- a) Participation in: equal status, reciprocal relationships (i.e. category c above)
and
- b) the full range of roles pertinent for that setting (from politeness to friendships)

Level 2 inclusion involves being included as a valued member of the class on a consistent basis by at least some members. i.e. belonging/having emotional connections with a specific friend(s) or group(s) as well as participation in Level 1 inclusion. Experiencing this form of inclusion reflects the philosophy underlying the New Zealand Disability Strategy (2001) and is facilitative of development and learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

How did the participants experience inclusion and exclusion?

The experiences of the four participants are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Participants' experiences of facilitative inclusion or exclusion in each setting during transition from preschool to school

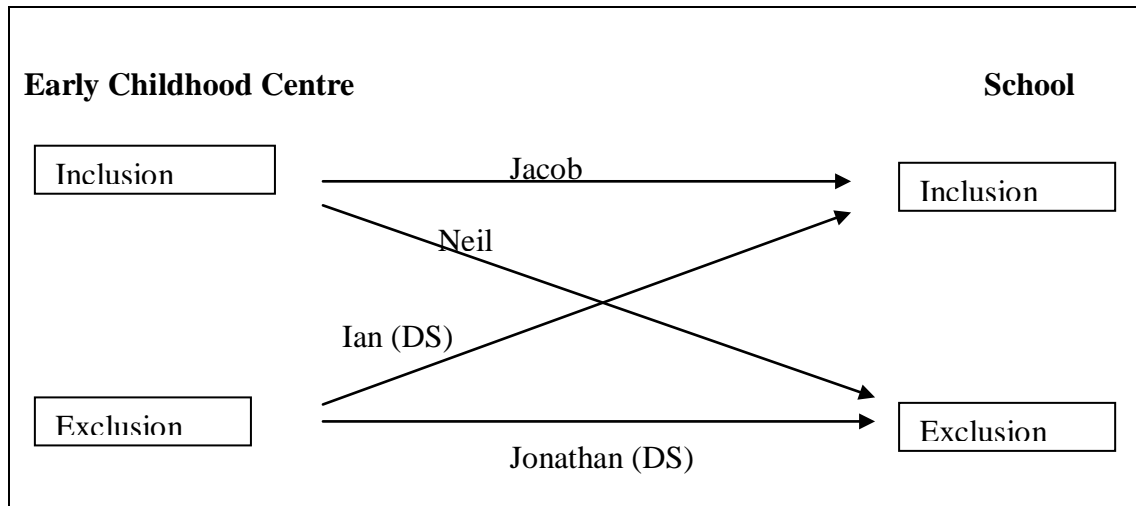


Figure 1 indicates that none of the boys with DS (Ian or Jonathan) experienced facilitative inclusion (interactions comprising both Levels 1 and 2 forms of inclusion) at preschool while both typically developing boys (Jacob and Neil) did. However, irrespective of impairment, these outcomes and underlying processes changed at primary school for two of the children (Ian and Neil). These changes occurred in different directions. While Ian became an included member at school towards the end of his first week, Neil who was included at preschool was excluded for his first six weeks of school prior to the summer holidays. Facilitative inclusion only occurred after changes in class composition the following year. Jonathan experienced exclusion in both settings, while Jacob was the only child to experience inclusion in both settings.

The differences in the experiences of children with and without DS at preschool were not evident at school where there was more variation between the school systems than between the children with and without DS. If the characteristics of DS inevitably led to exclusion and the absence of DS resulted in inclusion, then one would expect all the boys with DS to be excluded and the typically developing boys included regardless of settings. Furthermore, the finding that there were major changes in Ian

and Neil's experiences of inclusion/exclusion after their transitions to school, provides further support for the significant role contexts play in facilitating inclusion or exclusion irrespective of impairment. Neil (a competent typically developing child who was well-liked at preschool) could not gain access to more advanced forms of inclusion, despite considerable efforts on his part involving a range of mature strategies yet Ian who engaged consistently in anti-social behaviour at preschool, gained access to peer inclusion when he began to use more socially appropriate behaviours within his first week of school. This strongly suggests that inclusion and exclusion were not related to disability, but rather related to curriculum and management issues.

Case Study: Ian (DS)

The following episode in the case study of Ian illustrates clearly the socially constructed nature of disability and its impact on outcomes before and after his transition to school. Ian experienced illusory inclusion before his transition to school where he experienced facilitative inclusion.

1. Illusory Inclusion (Early Childhood Centre)

Context: Book corner where four children including Ian wait for their parents to collect them

Ian and William are looking at the same book. Ian labels all the zoo animals correctly. William ignores Ian's vocalisations and makes up a story about the animals. Incorrectly labels the camel a kangaroo. Ian points out and says, "Monkey. Another child looks on. William says to the child, "I'm not reading you a story. I'm reading Ian a story." William's mother arrives. William hands the book to Ian and says to his mother, "I'm reading Ian a story." His mother asks, "Are you?" William and his mother depart. [Observer comment: No farewell greeting to Ian]

After a similar incident on another day, the teacher rewards the typically developing child for reading to Ian, "That was very kind of you."

Interpretation of Inclusion

The peer (William) takes on the dominant role ("I'm reading Ian a story") and sees himself engaging in a generous act (confirmed by teacher as 'very kind') as opposed

to a mutually shared activity. Ian is constructed as an object that can be ‘discarded’ when time for the favour is over. There was no personal connection – no farewell greeting on departure, which was uncommon amongst the contrast children in similar contexts. Ongoing interactions of this nature where the minority status child is ignored are likely to compromise developmental processes such as self-agency, self-worth, language and social relationships. There was also no reciprocity or shared meanings, essential for more advanced forms of inclusion for both participants. Ian’s contributions are ignored, including his correct labelling of the kangaroo. Such ongoing ignoring suggests the low status this peer assigns Ian and places Ian at-risk for internalising such beliefs about himself and his abilities.

Teacher Behaviour

All staff in this setting engaged in practices stemming from the deficit/personal tragedy model of disability. e.g. Children were rewarded for treating Ian as an object of charity “That was very kind of you” (reading a book to Ian). They did not expect reciprocity from Ian, which probably reinforced his peers for viewing him as an object of charity. For instance, on one occasion a teacher asks James to push Ian in a trolley, which he does. After a substantial ride, Ian remains seated. The teacher says, “Thank you James. That was very kind of you (pushing Ian in trolley). Will you take him (Ian) round again?” There was no suggestion that Ian might give James a turn. Mutually-satisfying relationships require some forms of reciprocity yet Ian was not provided with opportunities for learning this.

Whilst not evident in the book corner scenario, Ian engaged regularly in a number of anti-social behaviours. In order to help peers cope in these situations, the staff encouraged peers to verbally instruct Ian to terminate the undesired behaviour. However, no monitoring of this strategy appeared to take place and observations indicated it to be ineffective. This left Ian’s peers powerless and contributed to a level of avoidance. As one child stated, “One day he (Ian) throwed water over me. He’s not a very nice boy.” Another undesirable effect was that it cast Ian’s peers into the role of mini-disciplinarians or teachers, thus promoting unequal relationships not conducive to authentic inclusion.

Children also learnt to position Ian as ‘other’ (not like us) by the staff continuing conversations, which were meant for Ian but occurred as if he were not fully human or an integral member. For instance, Kyle asks a teacher, “Why has Ian got those trousers?” Why has he got bats on it?” The teacher replies, “Because he likes them”. Kyle responds, “I love those batman pants”. The teacher says to Ian, “Kyle likes your batman pants.” Such interactions constrained learning opportunities for how peers might interact with Ian directly. The teachers also used Ian’s peers as consultants about his behaviour, thus positioning them alongside the staff in a superior position to Ian. For instance, when Ian and several others were sitting in the book corner, the teacher noticed a book on the floor and Ian not reading. She asked the group, “Did he (Ian) take a book and throw it?”

Infra-structure supporting those Practices

When the early intervention team suggested alternative practices emanating from the social model of disability, staff were resistant. They favoured the individualised personal tragedy deficit model, which underpinned a course on ‘special needs’ recently attended by a key staff member.

The preschool-parent-early intervention relationship was co-operative, warm and friendly, but critical information concerning Ian’s anti-social behaviour was often withheld from the parents and early intervention team as one of the teachers reports, “We didn’t tell her (Ian’s mother) that he didn’t have a good day. As a parent you can only hear so much of that and Susan (mother) was getting stressed, so we didn’t tell her.” This decision seemed to affect the quality of inclusion provided at the centre.

The Education Review Office report commended the early childhood centre for the way it included children with impairments, which provided reinforcement for existing practices.

2. Illusory Inclusion/Exclusion (Pre-entry visit to School)

During Ian’s pre-entry visits to school, it was clear that the children did not automatically know how to include Ian in the new setting as evidenced in the following excerpts.

Family corner: Ian approaches the family corner. Kelly says to Erin, “Oh no! Ian wants to play. Kelly asks the early intervention teacher, “Can you take Ian away?”

Blocks: Ian knocks over an upright block. Philip says to Alex, “He’s (Ian) spoiling the game” (3X). Philip says to Ian, “You’re naughty. I’ll tell the teacher” (2X). Philip says to Alex, “He’s (Ian) not allowed on our road.”

Interpretation of Inclusion:

In the family corner, active exclusion is taking place. Ian is talked about as if he were an object and can be discarded. Use of the pronoun ‘He’ in the blocks incident indicates that Philip sees Ian as ‘other’ (not part of us). Authentic inclusion calls for use of ‘we’. None of the children displays skills reflective of inclusion. They ask for Ian’s removal (as if he is an object) and call in the teacher instead of dealing with the issue themselves.

3. Facilitative Inclusion (School)

By the second week of school, Ian experienced inclusion as an equal same-status participant and he engaged in the full range of roles, including friendships typical for that setting. As is evident from the scenario recorded towards the end of Ian’s first term, the nature of the peer interactions, teacher practices and indirect practices differed markedly from those at his early childhood centre.

Context: Block corner at Developmental Time

Each of the four children present including Ian have made their own houses. Ian puts a car in Alex’ house. Alex says to Ian, “No. Not in my house – in your (emphasised) house.” Ian takes the car out and puts it in his own house saying to Alex, “In there. See.” Alex says to Ian, “Yes. You need to make a roof...like this...like this Ian.” He shows Ian. Ian adds blocks in the same way Alex is showing him. Alex says to Ian, “See the roof, Ian.” Ian repeats, “Roof.” Alex responds to Ian, “The house is all complete. It’s a good house.” Ian says to Alex, “Thank you.” Ian adds some blocks to the house....Alex then says to Ian, “We need to make a new road now.” Ian repeats, “Road”.

Interpretation of Inclusion

Unlike in the previous scenarios, Ian is now included as a valued participant. There is reciprocity between the boys. Ian is now a contributing member and shared meanings are evident (e.g. Ian shows Alex that he has moved the car to his own house). Alex deals with unconventional behaviour (Ian putting a car in his house without asking) – a potential site for exclusion – by explaining and showing to Ian in a respectful way where to place the car and the game continues. Alex reinforces Ian's contribution, provides Ian with access to more advanced forms of understanding (how to build a roof) and involves him in a new aspect of the activity (joint creation of a road). He also emphasises critical words, something modelled by his teachers. Alex' use of the pronoun 'we' indicates Ian is now an integral member.

What has contributed to the shift in experiences?

The first major change is the shift in philosophy of disability, which permeated all systems affecting Ian. Instead of focussing on the child's deficits, Ian's teacher, principal and all pertinent others focused on creating a context that was inclusive of all the children in the class. Through regular dialogue with Ian's parents and the early intervention team this school became aware of the two central theories underlying disability, 'inclusion' and 'difference' and demonstrated an ability to translate the social model of disability into practice on a consistent basis.

Teacher Practices

The classroom norms already catered for diversity. The teacher and teacher-aide used Ian's enrolment to refine and expand the existing norms in a way that strengthened and altered the mainstream culture so that it became increasingly more responsive to diversity. The teacher and teacher-aide recognised and interrupted demeaning or illusory inclusion e.g. excessive hugging, picking up. The staff scaffolded children to re-frame any problems they interpreted within a deficit framework to one that focussed on the context. They helped children develop strategies whereby Ian could be included. For instance, when Ian's peers complained to the teacher about him putting too many cars on a co-operatively-built block structure, which subsequently broke, she said, "If there's a problem, tell Ian what it is. Tell Ian if there's too many cars, it'll break. Tell him where he can put the cars and blocks".

The teacher also openly interpreted the likely intent of any unconventional behaviour (a potential site for exclusion) in a positive and valuing manner. For instance, when Ian moved some little chairs from the desks over to his mother and little sister during a pre-entry visit when the class were involved in a mat activity and a child called out to the teacher, “Look what Ian’s doing”, she responded calmly and positively by interpreting the likely intent of Ian’s behaviour, “Yes, Ian’s Mum can now sit on a chair”. Peers were later observed interpreting the likely intent of Ian’s behaviour themselves.

The teacher and teacher-aide included activities that highlighted Ian’s competencies and interests in a way that made the overall class culture more inclusive for a greater number of children. The introduction and initial structuring of ball activities and games during interval and lunchtimes provided additional opportunities for other new entrants to experience inclusion.

The staff also facilitated Ian’s inclusion within peer group norms, which at times differed from adult and classroom norms. For example, even though the children were expected to remain seated during their eating of lunch, Ian and his peer group made brief attempts at breaking this rule. When Ian’s teacher noticed them engaging in a brief ritual which involved stamping their feet, standing up briefly and laughing after the duty teacher had walked by and was not looking, she smiled and commented to Ian’s peer group, “Are you boys having fun?” thus supporting peer group norms and Ian’s inclusion within those norms.

The teacher and teacher-aide consistently specified and reinforced social norms over procedural norms. Waiting for Ian who was slower at walking back to class or for the new boy who was not sure where to go when the bell rang were more important considerations than being first in line.

In contrast to preschool, the classroom teacher always focused on the establishment of shared meanings and relationships in which there was a balance of power as opposed to rewarding one child (the one with majority status) for interacting with other. On observing Ian and a classmate jointly making dough cakes for example, the teacher

responded, “It’s nice seeing you play together. What beautiful cakes you two have made! Are they cooked?”

As part of valuing the whole child, the teacher and teacher-aide attempted to understand the implications of DS for learning and changed practices and norms to enable all the children’s learning to be successful. For instance, researchers have found that children with DS have a number of neurological differences which are likely to reduce the accuracy, speed and consistency of motor responses that indirectly affect the precision, sequencing, timing and production of speech movements (Capone, 2004). Therefore to enable Ian to actively participate and benefit from his inclusion in a reading group, the teacher and/or teacher-aide slowed down the pace of the entire group’s oral reading and at the same time specified other individualised goals for other children (e.g. reading with expression).

Comparisons with Jonathan (DS) and Neil (Typically Developing)

Jonathan’s early childhood experiences were similar to Ian in that he experienced interactions characteristic of Level 1 inclusion (those where connections between participants were superficial) and exclusion. However, unlike Ian who experienced a richer and more inclusive learning context at school, Jonathan’s schooling resulted in ongoing experiences of Level 1 inclusion, illusory inclusion and increasingly hostile forms of exclusion. At school, classmates interpreted Jonathan’s differences as deviancy to which they responded by excluding him. Unlike Ian and his classmates, Jonathan and his peers were not given access to processes that might facilitate their inclusion. Since the school’s definition of inclusion involved the assimilation of children with impairments into the school’s existing culture, as opposed to changing the mainstream, the practices instigated (e.g. the teacher-aide working exclusively with Jonathan as opposed to a group) are likely to have exacerbated Jonathan’s exclusion as they were disconnected from the school and classroom’s existing culture. Classing some students as ‘deviant’ or ‘other’ creates divisions of ‘them’ and ‘us,’ which is then used to justify the exclusion of some students from the curriculum. In contrast to Ian’s school where the teacher supported children in reframing any problems they interpreted from a deficit perspective to one that focused on their providing an inclusive context, children in Jonathan’s school learnt that it was

acceptable to exclude when ‘deviant’ children did not fit the existing norms. For instance:

On Jonathan’s fifth day, peers excluded Jonathan from the group’s reading-related activities by blocking access to the materials and activities, taking books from him and discussing what they saw as his incompetencies. When the teacher noticed Jonathan disrupting the matching word card activity (possibly in sheer frustration at being unable to access the materials), she uses his ‘inappropriate’/deviant behaviour as the reason for legitimising his segregation, “I think at this time he’s quite disruptive. He might be better off one-to-one with a teacher-aide.”

In this class, the wider classroom culture was assumed to be facilitative of all other children’s learning, but at least two other minority status children were observed experiencing similar incidents of exclusion, as was Neil, the typically developing child in this study. Processes such as no attention to peer relationships, a lack of appropriate social norms (e.g. looking out for one another, ensuring no-one is left out), poor playground supervision, a focus on a narrow set of academic outcomes and a recitation task-structure (Bossert, 1979) made it difficult for any newcomer to become included as valued members of this class.

Broader Infra-structure affecting Inclusion/Exclusion

The quality of children’s inclusion is not only affected by what occurs in the child’s microsystem but also by wider systems impacting on that system. The following table illustrates some critical features, which differed between the two school settings and which contributed to facilitative inclusion (Ian and Jacob) or illusory inclusion and exclusion (Jonathan and Neil).

Table 1: Factors at Mesosystem and Exosystem levels (more distal levels) Conducive to Successful and Unsuccessful Inclusion in the Classroom

	Issue	Successful Outcomes (Ian and Jacob)	Unsuccessful Outcomes (Jonathan and Neil)
1	Existing infra-structure	Accommodating of differences	Not accommodating
2	Vision of successful outcomes by all	Yes	No
3	Knowledge to achieve outcome	Yes	No
4	Model of disability	Social construction	Individual deficit
5	Principal	Supports all in implementing shared philosophy	Supports mostly teacher: focus on external resources
6	Professionals	Inclusive philosophy required	Special education
7	Parents	Authentic partnership with sound knowledge base	Devalued
8	Meetings	Focus: parent's concerns	Parent's concerns dismissed
9	Historical approach	None	On-site special units
10	Teacher-aide selection	Trained teacher with inclusive philosophy	Special education background
11	Teacher-aide role	Team teaching	Attached to child
12	Teacher support	Parents and school staff with shared vision	Friendly relationships, but lack of knowledge

Overall for children to experience facilitative inclusion and for a supportive infrastructure to maintain those outcomes, the data indicated that the most critical ingredients were:

- 1) An educational setting with a holistic approach to children's well-being and development, sensitive to the diversity in its existing population and engaging in practices which characterise effective teaching.
- 2) A discourse of disability that focuses on the context and sees disability as part of, not distinct from, that context.

3) A vision of what successful inclusion might look like based on the social model, whilst acknowledging the nature of the impairment on the teaching-learning process, adherence to the model at all levels and ongoing monitoring by all key participants.

Historical connections with special educational facilities, individuals or courses acted as an impediment to all of the above. The presence or absence of the above determined the direction of all other practices. At all levels, where outcomes were successful, these practices were used to strengthen the existing culture by broadening norms and therefore enabling a greater range of children to experience success. Where outcomes were unsuccessful, all practices focused on the individual's deviancy, distinct from the existing classroom and preschool/school culture with no implementation or expansion of norms to embrace the kinds of diversity evident in the student population irrespective of the child with DS.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has highlighted what inclusion involves at the 'chalk face' and identified some of the processes necessary to achieve it. Contexts clearly affect the quality of educational processes and outcomes, as evidenced by the children's differing experiences of inclusion and exclusion as they moved from one educational setting to another irrespective of impairment. Studying the same children in two settings as they moved from their early childhood centres to school indicates that inclusion is not a within-child characteristic, but dependent on the context. The importance of the transition process is noted as clearly it provides a context in which new opportunities can be created. The challenge for educators, parents and professionals is to recognise and facilitate the necessary processes at all levels of the educational setting's culture and belief systems in order for favourable outcomes to accrue.

It is of some concern that the quality of 'inclusion' experienced in the two early childhood settings was less than optimal for the children with DS. Furthermore, it is concerning that Jonathan's school and the professional support they used, were resistant to the philosophy and practices suggested. One wonders what competencies Ian and Jonathan might have attained and how their (mostly ex-preschool) peers

might have facilitated their entry into school, had they experienced facilitative inclusion for the 1-2 years they attended their early childhood centres.

For children to experience facilitative inclusion requires early childhood centres and schools to adopt a philosophy of difference, which embraces disability and other differences such as race and gender as valued attributes, as opposed to deficiencies or problems. Since transitions also have the potential to change children's favourable preschool experiences of inclusion to exclusion at school (Neil), clearly more attention needs to be focused on the quality of educational inclusion for all children irrespective of impairment and type of educational setting.

That contexts influence facilitative inclusion more than children's individual impairments adds credence to the claims of disability theorists (Barnes, 2003; Clough & Barton, 1995; Oliver, 1986, 1996), who argue that individual characteristics do not disable, but disability occurs as a consequence of participation in contexts which fail to cater for people with impairments. These results are supportive of previous research studies (Philips, 1997; Rietveld, 2005; Kliever, 1998) that have shown how children with intellectual impairments can be prevented from experiencing inclusion by preschool/school norms that do not accommodate children who move, behave and/or communicate in diverse ways.

The data also provide evidence for Bronfenbrenner's (1979) and Vygotsky's (1978) views that socio-cultural factors outside the classroom influence the quality of educational processes occurring in the classroom. Successful inclusion at the more distal levels of the mesosystem and exosystem involved: i) the presence of an existing school infrastructure which is capable of accommodating both the biological and socio-cultural diversity present in all key participants, ii) a vision of what successful inclusive outcomes might involve together with commensurate practices and iii) a model of disability focussing on the context which informs those practices.

While the institutional social context will affect the quality of inclusion in a significant way, the data suggest that taking into account the nature of the child's biological differences as they affect the teaching/learning process would also seem important. The example of a teacher slowing down the pace of the oral reading group

to enable Ian's participation highlights this point. By contrast, Jonathan, never read aloud with his fast-paced group, despite observations indicating that he was able to read these same books at home. While some users of the social model of disability downplay the impact of differing impairments on learning and living (Ballard, 1998) this was never the intention of the social model's originators (Oliver, 1996; Barnes, 2003). Since the context is mediated by the within-child factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which necessarily includes the child's impairment (biological diversity), the nature of this influence must be considered within any holistic view of children's development and learning.

While this study has contributed to our understandings of what is involved in (facilitative) inclusion, it does not claim to have identified all the necessary components, linking mechanisms and practices. The small sample size involving one gender in one city and the use of observational methods which privileges the researcher's interpretation of events over children's, call for a degree of caution in generalising from the data. At the same time, it is envisaged that others may be prompted by the data to study some of the issues in greater detail. It is only by further learning about the complexities of the processes children participate in and all the factors influencing those processes that it will be possible to create even more optimal and facilitative learning environments for all children.

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